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AUTHOR Stewart, Viola D.
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ABSTRACT

The goal of the itinerant vision consultant is to enhance the education of Black visually handicapped students in a normal school environment by using special techniques, devices, and equipment--with the aim of helping students to live and work in a community with sighted people. To be considered for admission to special classes or for itinerant services in the Philadelphia schools, each visually handicapped student's record must be reviewed by a special committee (including the classroom teacher, counselor, itinerant teacher, opthalmologist, and psychologist) with input from the parent. Meetings are planned so that parents become involved in the decision making process. (SB)

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PROVIDING A CONTINUUM OF SERVICE FOR BLACK VISUALLY HANDICAPPED STUDENTS

Viola D. Stewart
Itinerant Vision Consultant
School District of Philadelphia
Overbrook School for the Blind
6333 Malvern Avenue
Philadelphia, Pa. 19151

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To enhance the education of the visually handicapped student in a normal school environment, using special techniques, devices and equipment -- with the aim of helping him to live and work in a community with sighted people -- is the goal of the itinerant vision consultant.

Mainstreaming has a longer history for visually handicapped children than for children with any other handicap. It goes back to the first years of this century. The movement received special impetus during the 1950s and the 1960s when extraordinary efforts were made to educate the victims of retrolental fibrolasia in regular classrooms with their sighted peers. The motivating philosophy of this movement was summarized for the first time in 1954 at the National Work Session on the Education of Blind with Sighted.

> The growth and the development of some blind children are achieved to a greater extent and in a more effective atmosphere when they have the opportunity to participate with sighted children. Any school system has a big challenge to meet in establishing and mainstreaming an educational program for the children of the community. It has a greater challenge and meets its community responsibilities more adequately when it includes the education of exceptional children as an integral part of its services.
> (The Pine Brook Report 1954 page 14)

The visually handicapped child or youth is usually recognized by the very thick lensed glasses he wears or by his use of a white cane or sighted human guide. This group

includes partially sighted, legally blind and blind. The partially sighted has a visual acuity (with correction) of 20/70 -- he sees at 20 feet what a sighted person sees at 70 feet; the legally blind has a visual acuity (with correction) of 20/200 -- he sees at 20 feet what a sighted person sees at 200 feet; the blind has a visual acuity L.P. -- light perception -- or visual acuity of Nil -- nothing. According to the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness there are about 136,000 school age children and youth who are visually handicapped. The visual loss in youth is due to such medical conditions as rubella and accidents. In Philadelphia, about 225,000 children attend public schools. The latest survey of visually handicapped pupils reveals 167 in special classes, 252 in itinerant program -- 60% are Black, 30% are White, 10% are Bilingual and Others.

Until the late '70s, the visually handicapped were educated in special classes at Logan School. A unique program was established there for the integration of visually handicapped with sighted students in their neighborhood school. The visually handicapped K-8 were bussed in and taught by special educators -- sighted pupils K-6 were taught by regular teachers. All students share in Music, Physical Education and Auditorium Programs. To be considered for admission to special classes or for itinerant services each student's record must be reviewed by a special committee with input from the parent. This committee included a classroom teacher, the counselor, an itinerant teacher, the ophthalmologist and the psychologist.

Some questions to be considered include the following:

(1) Is the child visually handicapped?

(2) What is the diagnosis? prognosis?

(3) Is special class placement recommended?

(4) Shall the child remain in neighborhood school?

(5) Is the child ready for mainstreaming?

(6) Shall the child remain in special class?

Great care must be taken in arrangements for this meeting with parent. This meeting is planned so that a parent cannot refuse to come:

(1) If possible, try to get both parents to come.

(2) Set the time at parents' convenience -- even after school hours.

(3) Don't accept excuses -- a young child may accompany his parent -- "Bring her along, school is for children."

(4) Limit the time span of conference -- parent must either be home for other children returning from school or must be back on the job.

(5) Try and anticipate other excuses -- make an appeal -- "We need you to help us make the right decisions. Remember, the student is your child."

At the meeting:

(1) Be available early to greet parent, help her to relax.

(2) Do sit around table as equals -- sitting at desk looking down at parents is threatening.

(3) Speak in simple terms, except medical terms.

(4) Encourage input and really listen when parent speaks.

(5) When student joins group, do include him in discussion. He should be made acutely aware that what he thinks and feels about his education is important -- he needs to verbalize.

If decision is reached, tentative plans are made to visit neighborhood school. At this meeting, usually in the spring, a counselor is our host. The parent and student are involved in the discussion. They are encouraged to:

(1) ask questions and make comments re academic programs, character of students, special activities;

(2) participate in forming a temporary roster -- a Reading course is recommended if not required. "Read to succeed."

On a tour of the school the parent talks with the nurse re "regular or special" physical education. When the visually handicapped student is severely handicapped or blind, more must be done. A mobility instructor becomes a part of supportive service. A list of all texts is requested from the Department Heads; brailled texts, large print texts, recordings for the blind, will be provided in the fall. Administration and provision of tests -- large print and braille -- will be done as requested.

Since the passage of Public Law 94-142, which provides for the education of all handicapped children, the program for the visually handicapped has moved to Overbrook School for the Blind. This physical plant is shared by a public school K-6 and residential pre-school-12. The child study evaluation team cannot function without written consent of

parent. The Individual Education Program cannot be developed without input from parent.

What happens to the visually handicapped after high school? With parental consent, each is referred to the Bureau for the Visually Handicapped. A counselor is assigned to each referral. When the student receives his acceptance to a college, he has been awarded scholarship covering all expenses. They have attended community colleges, small four-year colleges, state universities, law schools. Those with commercial interests have attended secretarial institutes and business colleges. Some dropouts, along with those interested in trades, have attended trade schools.

Depending upon potential, motivation and application, with the inspired knowledge that he is expected to perform well and with independence, the visually handicapped will truly take his place living and working in the community with his sighted peers.

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